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Applications and Infrastructure for Internet-Based Agents

Munindar P. Singh and Michael N. Huhns

Modern information systems, exemplified by the Internet and corporate intranets, are typically large and complex. The software applications and other components comprising the information systems are also complex. Software agents are becoming an essential part of these systems because they mitigate the complexity, and they achieve this in two important ways—one technical and the other psychological.

Technically, each agent provides a locus of intelligence for managing a subset of the information in the system, either on its own initiative or under the direction of a user. Each intelligent agent can be readily replicated and then distributed as needed. This agent-based approach to information management is both scalable and cost-effective.

Psychologically, people need abstractions by which they can understand, manage, and use complex systems effectively. A natural and convenient abstraction appears to be one based on anthropomorphizing the information system components, that is, treating the components as animate. In this abstraction, software components are like human agents. The abstraction is effective, because people have a lot of experience in dealing with other people, and they can apply their experience to understanding and dealing with complex software.

Animate components are an example of a more general trend in software engineering to construct software that mimics real-world objects. If the mimicry is done well, the software will appear familiar and thus easy to use. The net result is a great interest in software agents.

This special issue of IEEE Internet Computing is devoted to software agents. It captures at two levels a slice of the current state of research, practice, and commercialization of agents.

At a higher level, a new class of applications is being developed based on the capabilities provided by software agent technology. As an example of this, the paper by Andreoli et al. describes how agents can enable and simplify the implementation of the next generation of electronic commerce. The paper by Ohsuga similarly deals with sophisticated web-based interactions for electronic commerce, but describes an alternative architecture of agents.

At a lower level, the new applications require the support of new infrastructure services. These services must provide for (1) secure communications, ranging from simple exchanges of messages to structured conversations among agents, (2) trusted transactions, (3) persistent, robust, and reliable operation, (4) ease of use, and (5) ease of management. The papers by Kotz et al. and Karjoth and Oshima focus on the infrastructure services that are enabled by the transmission and reception of executable code in the form of mobile agents. By making the mobile agents secure themselves, the services provided by the agents can be made secure as well.

To provide for robustness, Ohsuga implements agents that combine mobility and planning in order to satisfy their explicitly represented goals. The planning, a form of least-commitment planning, occurs at both a base level and a reflective level. It is interleaved with plan execution by the

agents. The result is agents that decide on what appears to be their best course of action and, if they get stuck, become aware of it and either perform additional planning or move to a new environment where they might obtain the information they need to make progress toward their goals.

Although they represent the outcome of a relatively young field of research, software agents are beginning to appear in products, and commercial tools are being marketed for their construction and application. This issue provides three perspectives on this productization and marketing. First, Joe Kiniry reports on several innovative and aggressive companies that are offering products based on mobile-agent technology. Joe puts their software through its paces and compares the results.

Second, Bruce Krulwich provides an in-depth look at the technology of his own company, AgentSoft. Bruce describes four increasingly capable classes of agents that are needed to provide the next generation of web services, and uses these classes to describe the market niche occupied by AgentSoft.

Third, Patti Maes discusses what she sees as the present and future possibilities for software agents. Patti's perspective is unique, as she is both a researcher and a commercializer of agent technology.

The day is approaching when the web is populated by agents carrying out the bidding of users, and the research and technology described herein is helping to bring that day closer. We think you will enjoy and appreciate the papers in this special issue.

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